

Executive Director Speech: Women in CIA

**Chicago Council on Foreign Relations
Nora Slatkin, Executive Director, Central Intelligence Agency
Women in CIA**

May 15, 1996

I am pleased to participate in this lecture series on "Women in American Politics." Of course, the Central Intelligence Agency must, by charter, stay out of politics, so I have changed the subject of my talk to "Women in CIA." As you know, that is a topic that has aroused some public controversy in recent years. What I hope to do tonight is to give you a balanced picture of what it's like for the women who have chosen to spend their careers in the business of intelligence. I would like to thank the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations for giving me this opportunity.

Before I talk about the real women of CIA, I would like to take on some of the stereotypes. First, there are the women that we read about in the spy novels and see in the movies. Of course we all know that James Bond is a fantasy and Bond women are a fantasy of a different sort. Nevertheless, newspapers like to use Bond terminology to describe the CIA. And TV documentaries on CIA play the Bond theme in the background. But that's not us.

The second stereotype is that CIA is full of white male old boys from Ivy League schools, and they do all of the real work. There are a lot of people who believe this. A few weeks ago the San Diego Union Tribune called CIA one of the government's last "all-white male bastions." That statement completely overlooks the work, indeed, the very existence of women in the Agency. The truth is, we have a lot of women, outstanding women, in every part of CIA. You can't dismiss us that easily.

There is one more point I want to take issue with, not a stereotype, but rather a perception, the perception that CIA is a terrible place for a woman to work. It arises in part from a few well-publicized cases women have brought against CIA. You have probably heard of the Jane Doe Thompson case and the Class Action suit brought by women in the Directorate of Operations, CIA's clandestine service. Both of these cases reflect some very real problems that we have had at CIA, particularly the DO. I don't want to minimize these problems. We have made progress toward solving them, but they still exist. It will take a long-term, concerted effort to create a workplace where merit is the sole and universal criterion for advancement, and race and gender do not matter.

But the truth is, most women at the Agency walk away from their jobs at night thinking that CIA is a very special and exciting place to work. Tonight I will introduce you to some CIA women.

First I would like to give you a little of our history by going back to the CIA's forerunner, the Office of Strategic Services, or OSS. The OSS was run by a visionary named General William Donovan. "Wild Bill" Donovan believed that the best way into the mind of the enemy was to harness the minds, talents and experiences of every kind of American, this meant women as well as ethnic minorities. While many people were gripped with a fear of subversion, while Japanese Americans were being put in internment camps, the OSS was hiring Japanese, and German, and Italian Americans. The OSS personnel office once boasted that its payroll listed every nationality and every occupation. And the OSS hired thousands of women to work in many types of jobs.

We may never know the true extent of the accomplishments of the women of OSS, because they were instructed to keep quiet about what they did and they took these directives seriously. A lot of OSS women won't speak of what they did, even years later. One former OSS officer, Betty MacDonald McIntosh, did write a memoir. She wrote of being warned very sternly by the OSS security officer never to divulge any aspect of her employment. "We are anonymous. If people ask you what you do here, tell 'em you are file clerks. People aren't interested in file clerks -- not enough to ask questions." Betty evidently downplayed her own accomplishments. The tattered copy of her book in the Agency's Historical Intelligence Collection bears a faded, handwritten note that reads, "I have been told that this girl, modest and writing in a semi-humorous way, was one of the best operators in OSS."

Virginia Hall was a real clerk -- with the State Department. She was a highly qualified clerk. She had studied at Radcliffe, Barnard and George Washington University. She also did advanced studies in political science and international affairs in Paris, Vienna, Strasbourg, Grenoble, and Toulouse. The State Department believed that Virginia had a very promising career ahead of her in the upper echelons of the clerical branch. Secretary of State Cordell Hull noted that Hall could "become a fine career girl in the Consular Service," but he rejected her appeal to become a career Foreign Service Officer. The official reason cited was that Hall had lost one leg below the knee in an accident, and walked with an artificial limb.

Hall left State at the outbreak of World War II, giving up the opportunity to file increasingly important documents. In March of 1941, she joined the British Special Operations Executive. There she got an advanced education of a different sort. She learned about weapons, communications, and security. She used these skills to set up an extensive agent network in unoccupied France, escaping to Spain just ahead of the German army and the Gestapo.

Hall then transferred to the OSS. Although well known to the Gestapo and under constant threat of capture, she organized, armed, and trained three battalions of French Resistance forces. She directed them in sabotage operations against the German army. At great personal risk, Hall also transmitted radio messages to Allied troops in the critical weeks after the invasion of Normandy. While German direction finders tried to pinpoint her location, she sent the first word that the German General Staff was moving its headquarters from Lyon to Le Puy -- a critical turning point in the fighting. For her efforts, Virginia Hall was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, this nation's second highest military award for bravery after the Medal of Honor. She was the only civilian American woman in World War II to receive this award.

Virginia Hall and the other women of the OSS worked in wartime. The CIA inherited many of the functions and the people of the OSS, including Betty McIntosh and Virginia Hall. But CIA was created as a peacetime intelligence service. In the CIA, as in the rest of the country, it became more difficult for women to move into responsible positions after the war. In peacetime, our society somehow felt it could afford the luxury of wasting the talents of women and leaving the Virginia Halls of this world deep in the file drawer.

Yet women gradually worked their way into the middle ranks, and then into the most important positions in the CIA. In recent years, as attention in CIA and elsewhere has focused on the need for greater diversity in the workforce, gains for women and minorities have accelerated. Currently, women make up over 15 percent of the senior intelligence ranks, double the figure from 1990.

Let me talk a little about the Directorate of Operations or DO, because that is where we have had our most visible problems. There has been a persistent attitude that in many of the male-dominated cultures overseas, women cannot operate successfully as case officers -- CIA employees who recruit foreigners to provide information. Experience has proven, however, that that is not the case. Indeed, men in these cultures may even be more comfortable giving information to a woman. Nevertheless, women in the DO have often been delegated to jobs writing reports, doing research, or other support work. Even war-seasoned OSS veterans like Betty McIntosh found themselves doing largely office work when they got to the CIA, rather than recruiting spies. Since 1990, there has been substantial improvement in promotion rates for women in the DO. Women have been most successful in moving into the top headquarters management jobs -- nearly a third of these positions are now held by women. In the field, progress in moving women into important assignments has been slower, but even that situation is in the process of changing.

There are many women who have excelled and had outstanding careers in the DO. We have had remarkable women chiefs of station and case officers. I wish I could talk about them, but their names and stories are classified. I can give you an example of a DO woman whom you may have heard about, Jeanne Vertefeuille, the woman who changed Aldrich Ames' life. Jeanne was an expert in Soviet counterintelligence, an investigator who knew the intricate workings of KGB and GRU operations. She was the woman in charge of the team of molehunters that tracked down Aldrich Ames. In hindsight, it now seems that catching Ames should have been easy and obvious, like the Conan Doyle stories when Sherlock Holmes explains everything. In reality, it wasn't easy. In this country, we don't lock people up on mere suspicion or circumstantial evidence. The arrest of Ames in February 1994 was the result of long hours of tedious work, painstaking collection of evidence, and analysis of data. Jeanne and the other investigators had to establish links between the traitor

and the cases that were compromised. They had to follow up on numerous other possibilities, including other suspects, a communications compromise, or a compromise of the Moscow station. In the meantime, the KGB was doing everything in its power to divert attention from the real mole. Jeanne worked without the benefit of hindsight and with the press of competing priorities. She and her team pushed on when others were distracted and gradually closed in on Ames. A mistake could have tipped him off or jeopardized his conviction. But, because Jeanne and other investigators did their work carefully, Aldrich Ames now has a permanent home in Allenwood Prison in Pennsylvania.

After it was all over, Time magazine asked Jeanne Vertefeuille for permission to do a photo shoot. She protested that there were still members of her family who didn't know where she worked. Nevertheless, she finally agreed. You may have seen Jeanne staring out from a full glossy page of Time, billed as "the little gray-haired lady who just wouldn't quit." She was holding a spy glass reflecting the image of Aldrich Ames. I can imagine some relative sitting down at the breakfast table, opening Time Magazine, and exclaiming, "My word, that's Aunt Jeanne. I thought she was a file clerk or something."

Let me move now from people to personnel policies. I would like to talk for a few minutes about some of the things we have done and the goals we have set in the last year in our effort to redress long-standing inequities at CIA and to promote a more diverse workforce.

First of all, we have begun to hold senior managers responsible for ensuring a level playing field in hiring, assignment, and promotion practices. We want to make sure that everyone is judged on performance, not on gender or race.

Second, we are expanding and improving our programs to recruit and retain minorities in the work force. Last year, our percentage of minority hires was 25 percent, and we are improving that figure. Unfortunately, because of downsizing, the number of new hires is relatively low. As a result, it will take time to see major changes in the demographics of the workforce as a whole.

Third, we are putting a special focus on preparing women and minorities in the middle grades for advancement and putting more women and minorities in senior management positions. We want to identify and remove barriers to advancement.

Fourth, we have set the goal of eliminating incidents of racial and sexual harassment.

Finally, we are supporting a better balance of work and family for employees, including encouraging the use of alternative work schedules.

We have had success, but we have a long way to go before Director Deutch and I are satisfied. In the past year, roughly a third of the people appointed to the top 64 command positions in the CIA were women -- overall, women now hold a quarter of these positions. Currently, the head of CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology is a woman. The Agency's Comptroller is a women. We also have women office directors, women chiefs of station overseas, women who serve with distinction in every part of the Agency. I am the first woman to hold the position of Executive Director, which means that I handle the day-to-day operations of CIA.

I have given you a few stories and a few statistics, but there are a couple of key points that I want you to remember. The first is that the status of women in the CIA has generally been a reflection of the status of women in American society. Most of the problems experienced by CIA women would not be unfamiliar to women in the rest of government and in the private sector.

The second message that I want to leave you with is that we cannot afford to waste the talents of women or minorities now any more than we could in the days of Donovan and the OSS. We still need the breadth of view that only a diverse workforce can provide. In the post-Cold War world the CIA has limited resources, and a mission that is compelling, and perhaps more difficult than it was in the days when we had one primary adversary. The Soviet Union was a slow-moving and relatively predictable target compared to the challenges we face today -- stemming the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; foiling the plans of terrorists, drug

traffickers and international organized crime groups; discovering the intentions of rogue states like North Korea, Iran, Iraq, the Sudan, and Libya; and monitoring the progress of the great powers, Russia and China, who are in the process of transition, and whose future is very much uncertain. For this task we need to make full use of the talents of all of our men and women.

Yes, we have had problems at CIA, and yes, some women have left the Agency in frustration. But for every woman who left, there were hundreds more who stayed, excelled, and changed the Agency in the process. These are women who have traveled the world, dined with ambassadors, briefed princes and presidents, run clandestine operations, and pioneered new technologies. In other words, there are a lot of women who have had a hell of a career at CIA. The next time you read an article about the CIA's old boys, I would like you to remember a few of our women.

Historical Document

Posted: Apr 03, 2007 08:54 PM

Last Updated: Jun 20, 2008 07:40 AM

Last Reviewed: Apr 03, 2007 08:54 PM